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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 003017

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: GOMBE STATE GOVERNOR'S VIEWS ON
NIGERIAN POLITICS AND THE U.S.

REF: ABUJA 03014

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F. JETER FOR REASON
1.5 (B).

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: On October 6, Ambassador Jeter and Economic Officer Hricik met with Gombe State Governor Hashidu and Deputy Governor Lidani to discuss Nigerian politics and Northern views on the U.S. The Governor said the National Assembly's attempt to impeach President Obasanjo sent the wrong message to the international community, but blamed Obasanjo for failing to work well with legislators. The impeachment process was intended to weaken Obasanjo to where he fails to win the PDP nomination, said the Governor. Hashidu thought former Head of State Babaginda would not run for the Presidency if Obasanjo were a candidate, but believed Vice President Atiku would run. More ominously, the Governor added that political instability could possibly open a door for military intervention. Hashidu said that Northern Nigerians largely misunderstand the US-led global war on terrorism, and that poverty is the main cause for the attraction of some Nigerians to radical Islam.
END SUMMARY

THE DOWNSIDE OF THE IMPEACHMENT PROCESS

¶12. (C) During an October 6 visit to Gombe State, Ambassador Jeter, accompanied by Econoff met with Gombe State Governor Abubakar Habu Hashidu and Deputy Governor Joshua Lidani to discuss Nigerian politics and views on the U.S. Responding to the Ambassador's question on the ongoing impeachment drive, Hashidu said that the National Assembly had the right to impeach the President; however the impeachment process now underway is counterproductive. It is splintering the country and sending the wrong message to the international community.

WEAKENING OBASANJO

¶13. (C) Hashidu stated that most Senators, who supported impeachment, were angry because Obasanjo did not release approximately USD 3.8 million for each Senatorial district's constituency projects. He added that Obasanjo had infuriated many National Assembly members, by calling them "jokers." Hashidu said that Northern governors, in the coming months, will attempt to act as a bridge between the President and the National Assembly. The Governor then remarked that the impeachment threat eventually will be dropped (he was right), but only after the President is further weakened to the extent that he is denied the PDP renomination. When the Ambassador stated that the National Assembly has not passed important bills such as telecommunications and AGOA, the Governor responded that the National Assembly was more interested in "making money" than in governance.

BABAGINDA

¶14. (C) Responding to the Ambassador's question, Hashidu said that he did not know if Babangida was supporting the impeachment drive (Hashidu served as Minister of Agriculture and Water during Babangida's rule (1988-1993)). He also stated that he was uncertain if IBB would run for President in 2003.

Hashidu agreed with an assessment that IBB would not run, if Obasanjo remained a candidate. Asked by the Ambassador whether Vice President Atiku will stand for the Presidency, the Governor said it was likely.

NIGERIA'S LEARNING CURVE

15. (C) The Ambassador told the Governor that the USG is not interested in political personalities but wanted to see a fair process. He added that Nigerians must decide who they want in public office. Asserting that growing political unrest was a sign of possible instability, Hashidu also added that this is a learning time for the country. Nigeria will continue to refine its democracy and maybe after 12 years the process will improve, he said. The Ambassador then remarked that in 1999, many highly qualified, able Nigerians chose not to run for public office, fearing that the fledgling democracy would not last. The Ambassador asked whether the new crop of candidates in 2003 would be better? The Governor said that in a national campaign you need money; the more you have the better you can contest. National Assembly members are making money and are better equipped to run for office than more qualified, but less affluent prospective candidates.

PITFALLS FOR NIGERIA

16. (C) Hashidu said many Obasanjo supporters now feel victimized by the impeachment process, and the resulting political uncertainty was being watched closely by some in the military. The Ambassador interjected that in the past this could have been a likely time for the military to step-in; however, our reading was this was not now the case. The Ambassador added that the USG had spent a lot of effort and resources working with senior and middle-level officers, but agreed with the Governor that lower ranking officers' motivations are difficult to know. Hashidu expressed fears that a military intervention could bring to power relatively young officers, "If we are not lucky, they will wipe us (ruling elite) all out. We cannot dig our own graves." Hashidu said that Nigeria was fortunate that many of those who could have staged a coup have been hopefully flushed out of the military by the Obasanjo Government. However, Hashidu remarked that U.S. support for Pakistan's President Musharraf, still gave some in the military hope. "If America will support Musharraf, maybe they'll do it for us (military ruler)," he added. The Ambassador remarked that the political realities in Pakistan and Nigeria were not the same.

NORTHERN VIEW ON THE U.S.

17. (C) The Ambassador asked Hashidu how Northern and Northeastern Nigerian Muslims perceive the United States in the post-9/11 era? The Governor said that radical Islamic groups in Nigeria view the U.S. as fighting a war against Islam; the average Northern Muslim is often misinformed and views the U.S. as over reacting, even if in self-defense. Though the vast majority of North and Northeast Muslims are Sunni, there are very small radical factions of Shiite and extremist Sunni Muslims, who are anti-American, he added. Hashidu then redirected the conversation, saying he thought Saudi Arabia should keep quiet about the US-led fight against terrorism and possible conflict with Iraq. Hashidu said, the ruling-elite in Saudi Arabia maintain power through U.S. and UK support. The Ambassador then asked whether there were Saudis, Iraqis or Iranians working through non-governmental organizations in Nigeria? The Governor said he was not aware of any, but he could not vouch for what is happening in Kano or other Northern states. Hashidu added that, due to poverty, millions of Nigerians are in Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan, often working in deplorable conditions. The Governor ended by saying poverty was the key ingredient for radical Islam's expansion in Nigeria and beyond.

COMMENT

18. (C) The Governor was very relaxed, open and engaging during the 75-minute meeting. Hashidu, who maintained high-ranking Ministerial positions under both military and civilian rule, now portrays himself as a populist democrat. A political strategist, Hashidu is among Northern Nigeria's most politically influential governors. Hashidu was delighted with the Ambassador's visit to Gombe and pulled out all the stops, including a State Dinner, a tour of State development projects (reftel), and a meeting with the State Executive Council. The Governor has made a point of calling a meeting with the Ambassador during Hashidu's subsequent visits to Abuja. This kind of personal engagement is absolutely essential to winning the hearts and minds in Nigeria's Islamic North. END
COMMENT

ANDREWS